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FAA tight-lipped on air marshal plan 'All we can say is that they are armed'

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For skittish air travelers, the idea of sitting next to an armed federal agent aboard a jetliner probably sounds better than a first-class upgrade.

But plans by the federal government to hire plainclothes officers to guard commercial airliners and passengers from hijackers come with questions.

For instance, how many air marshals ultimately will be put into service? Federal officials yesterday refused to say. Nor would they discuss the level or type of training new air marshals will receive. And they wouldn't talk about the potential dangers of discharging a firearm aboard a crowded plane at 35,000 feet.

"All we can say is that they are armed," FAA spokesman Paul Takemoto said. "They have training to use a minimal amount of force, but that force can be lethal."

Several dozen federal air marshals -- the FAA refuses to say how many -- now fly on some international routes as a deterrent to hijackers. But this week, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced plans to put hundreds more in the sky -- including on domestic routes -- to provide added security in the wake of last week's four hijackings of commercial airliners.

FAA officials said yesterday that new air marshals had begun training Monday at a facility in Atlantic City, N.J. They are being culled from the ranks of federal agencies and retired law enforcement officers.

The current program dates back to the Sky Marshal service begun in the 1970s to thwart hijackings to Cuba. It was revived as the Federal Air Marshal program begun after the 1985 hijacking of a TWA jetliner to Beirut.

But before the hijackings and terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, many commercial pilots were opposed to having firearms aboard jetliners out of safety concerns. The concerns were based on the belief that hijackers wanted to live to fulfill their goals and therefore having a gun aboard could make a bad situation worse.

That notion was dispelled on the day of the attacks, and now the Air Line Pilots Association and the Air Travelers Association, a passenger advocacy group, back the idea of having armed security on board planes.

A spokesman for the pilots' association said an agent with a gun could provide "the last line of defense" against a potentially catastrophic hijacking.

"If they do it right, you would not be getting a bunch of gun-slinging cowboys" as air marshals, said

John Mazon, spokesman for the pilots association.

"You would be getting a bunch of highly trained professionals who are trained to minimize the possibilities of something going wrong if they have to use their firearms," he said.

Mazon's group is also considering whether to push for armed pilots.

Critics question the usefulness of air marshals as a deterrent, given that thousands of flights are scheduled each day in the United States. San Francisco International Airport alone accounts for about 600 daily departures.

"The chances of an air marshal being aboard a plane I'm hijacking is going to be slim," said Charlie LeBlanc, managing director of Air Security International, a consulting group.

LeBlanc also questioned how safe the skies would be if a lone air marshal faced several hijackers.

"Unless you've got five hijackers all lined up in a row, someone else is going to get hurt" by shooting, he said.

Although the FAA refused to discuss it, air marshals are said to use bullets that fragment on impact to avoid piercing the skin of an aircraft and causing a sudden loss in compression.

But LeBlanc said that would do nothing to prevent passengers from being shot. He suggested the money spent on a few hundred air marshals could be better spent on beefing up security at the airport to ensure no weapons got aboard aircraft.

"By the fact of putting air marshals aboard aircraft, we are almost conceding that we can't with our best certainty ensure that hijackers don't make it to the aircraft," he said.

But U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, a member of the House Aviation Subcommittee, said yesterday that air marshals along with new security measures should restore the confidence of the flying public. He said the goal should be to recruit as many air marshals as needed to ensure safety.

"Presence is a good deterrent," he said.

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